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Bert Gordijn and Ruth Chadwick (eds.), Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity. Dordrecht: Springer, 2009. 242 pages. ISBN: 978-1402088513. Price: €112.30. Julian Savulescu and Nick Bostrom (eds.), Human Enhancement. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. ISBN: 978-0199299720. 416 pages. Price: £35.00.

Two recent books impressively show that ‘‘human enhancement’’ is now an established topic in biomedical ethics. The number of serious papers and books about improving human functioning had already reached a critical mass several years ago—the general debate about genetic engineering dating as far back as to the 1970s, a first comprehensive collection on ‘‘human enhancement’’ being published in 1998 by Erik Parens under the title ‘‘Enhancing Human Traits’’, and since then a significant rise in discussions regarding the possibility to intentionally alter human functioning, mainly stimulated by the 2003 report ‘‘Beyond Therapy’’ of the US President’s Council on Bioethics—, but the two collections of articles in renowned publishing houses now canonise the topic as a major field of research in biomedical ethics.

The books—‘‘Medical Enhancement and Posthumanity’’ (from now on MEP) and ‘‘Human Enhancement’’ (from now on HE)—have many features in common. Both try to present a comprehensive and balanced overview of the ethical debate about biotechnological interventions in humans and both treat the topic essentially from two angles: a theoretical one and an applied one. With this aim they gather 13 (MEP), respectively 18 (HE) scholarly papers from various academic disciplines (mainly by ethicists and philosophers, but they also include a political scientist, a theologian, a legal scholar, and an economist). The two books under review tackle the substantial theoretical questions related to the topic: Is any sharp distinction between therapy and enhancement conceptually possible, or convincing? And if so, would this distinction be relevant for the ethical judgment regarding therapeutical or enhancing interventions? Although these questions appear in many of the collected papers, the article ‘‘Therapy, Enhancement and Improvement’’ by Ruth Chadwick (in MEP) is particularly helpful. Chadwick shows, with a suggested further distinction between enhancement and improvement, the context-dependency of the terms with which we make our moral judgments. Another important theoretical issue is the question of what

constitutes human nature and whether there is any reason to prefer ‘‘the natural’’ over ‘‘the non-natural’’ on this matter. Here is a rich playground for fine-grained conceptual clarifications, an opportunity which many contributors have successfully exploited.

Both volumes illustrate the practical challenges and current developments in the wide field of intentionally altering human functioning: attempts to slow the aging process, neuroenhancement by use of psychoactive substances, the selection of traits in one’s offspring by genetic testing or engineering, technological devices connected to the human body (particularly the brain) to improve certain functions or to create new ones, but also the ‘‘classical’’ topics of cosmetic surgery (Mary Devereaux in MEP) and the ‘‘ethos of elite sport’’ (Torbjörn Tannsjö in HE). Taken together, the two volumes paint a broad picture of the current developments giving rise to the ethical debate, including also some more remote perspectives such as whether we could (and should) enhance our ‘‘truth orientation’’ in a not perfectly convincing article by Robin Hanson (in HE), as well as a brilliant discussion by Nick Bostrom and Anders Sandberg (in HE) on how we could profit from the evolutionary ‘‘wisdom of nature’’ to dif- ferentiate between enhancements which are worth pursuing and those we should stay away from.

A minor question: Why does the applied part follow the theoretical discussion in both volumes? Should it not be the other way round? After all, it is the practical problems which call for theoretical clarifications to help answer practical challenges.

The focus on posthumanity, especially present in MEP, is particularly interesting. MEP has both a stronger historical orientation (including an informative article on the history of medical enhancement by Urban Wiesing, and an accumulation of material for a ‘‘critical history of posthumanism’’ by Andy Miah) and tackles the concept of ‘‘posthumanity’’ more directly (particularly in the evocative article ‘‘Why I Want to be a Posthuman when I Grow Up’’ by Nick Bostrom). And it is right to focus on post-humanity, as—in my opinion—it is the possibility of changing the human life form which ultimately constitutes the most interesting part of the debate on human enhancement. Any given understanding of what it means to be a human being is challenged by the sheer possibility that things could be somehow different, even if we cannot clearly see the possible alterations to any familiar concept of ‘‘human nature’’ yet. While the debate about altering an isolated human trait—such as cognitive capacities, outward appearance or physical performance—and discussing its possible outcomes for individuals and collectives provides interesting questions that have been addressed by scholars over the years, the bigger challenge of the enhancement debate lies in the ‘‘anthropological’’ questioning of our human lives qua human lives and deciding which human traits we want to preserve when basically

everything could be intentionally altered. This more general, anthropological question appears prominently in the new collections.

A wide-range perspective does not dispense of making concrete judgements. So both collections present ethical discussions about human enhancements—both generally and with regard to specific techniques. Although both collections try to provide a variety of balanced ethical judgements about human enhancements, there is a strong bias towards a positive attitude, embracing the promises of biotechnology to improve the human condition. The rather conservative articles constitute a small minority and in the introduction of HE, the editors Julian Savulescu and Nick Bostrom even seem to mock the article by Michael J. Sandel on ‘‘The Case Against Perfection: What’s Wrong with Designer Children, Bionic Athletes, and Genetic Engineering’’ in their own volume. Of course the open- minded attitude towards new developments (widespread among academics) is to be preferred to parochial conservativism, but the role of editors of a comprehensive introduction consists in including serious critical voices and not only presenting stereotypes. In this sense the articles by C.A.J. Coady on ‘‘Playing God’’ and ‘‘Toward a More Fruitful Debate About Enhancement’’ by Erik Parens (both in HE) are very helpful. Both show the ambivalence and ambiguity of any well-considered positions on deeply altering human functioning and both urgently call for an integrative discussion on the possibility to alter human beings. In this sense, both introductions fall somewhat short of the reader’s justified expectations.

While one would hope for a structured overview and thorough presentation of the field, both introductions restrict themselves to some four brief pages of rather general remarks. Gordijn/Chadwick point out two charac- teristics of the current debate: Firstly, compared to the debate about improving human beings from the 17 and 18th centuries, with its profound scientific optimism, the contemporary debate about human enhancement takes as a starting point focussing on and questioning medicine as an adequate means of improving human lives. Secondly, the new means at hand allow today for interventions that formerly belonged to the realm of science fiction. Therefore the current debates tackle upcoming problems although they might still seem to be remote. The possibility of posthuman beings—understood as technically improved beings, genetically altered beings or beings not having a human or living body—belongs to such upcoming problems.

In their introduction to HE, Savulescu/Bostrom also state the obvious practical relevance of the biopolitical debate on enhancement and stress the role bioethicists might play in this field. Besides, they also note the important theoretical interest of the debate, connected to several other philosophical disciplines. Nevertheless, they are sceptical regarding whether

human enhancements ‘‘constitute a distinctive cluster of phenomena for which it would be appropriate to have a (multidisciplinary) academic subfield’’ (HE, p. 2).

How we can stretch the term ‘‘enhancement’’ (as it seems to cover either too large or too small a terrain) is the subject of much discussion, but the question what specifi- cally is the common core of the multifaceted enhancement debate remains open. One would have expected more than these brief remarks from both introductions, particularly as the books are meant to serve as comprehensive works of reference for the debate.

A few more—minor—critical remarks: Both books could have provided more information about the authors. Applied ethics being an interdisciplinary undertaking, the area of specialisation of the author is interesting for the reader. Whereas in HE it was obviously left to the authors themselves to indicate or not their affiliation in a footnote, any biographical or institutional hints concerning the authors have been thoroughly eliminated in MEP. HE has inconsistent referencing and bibliography and could have been proof read more carefully in some parts. MEP lacks an index (a service which should be included in the price of 159$ per copy).

These minor critiscisms do not affect the fact that both books gather many texts worth reading. And in being read together, the two collections provide a thorough and up-to- date introduction into the multifaceted debate on biotechnical improvements of human functioning. But, is there really something new under the sun? Has any progress taken place since the earlier collection ‘‘Enhancing Human Traits’’, edited in 1998 by Erik Parens; or—for lack of new developments—is there a shift of focus in the debate? Actually, upon a second read, the Parens collection seems to already identify all the crucial topics and mentions most arguments found in the new books. There are certainly some new techniques that serve as illustrative examples, techniques which were absent some ten years ago, but generally speaking, there is no substantial change. This is not meant as a reproach against the two new collections—nor is it a special praise for the earlier volume, which itself relies on older debates mentioned earlier—, it rather shows that the important and far reaching aspects of the debate lie beyond the current hot issues of how to stimulate a certain brain region, or which psychopharmaceutic substance brings about a specific desired super mental capacity. It is the old philosophical question of what it means to be a human being, which is raised emphatically by the possibility to alter our life form. From this perspective the current excitement about the hot topic of human enhancement in applied ethics might appear only to be an academic fashion. Still the topic is important, even very important, but less as a field of applied ethics among others, than as the challenge to organise the living together of different beings in one world. Considered from

this point of view, the new collections show—taken as collections rather than through single contributions—a hightened awareness of the anthropological dimension of the enhancement debate. The focus on posthumans (in MEP), the discussion of the moral status of altered beings in relation to ‘‘ordinary’’ human beings (Julian Savulescu in HE, Dieter Birnbacher in MEP), the quest of identifying posthuman ‘‘goods’’ (Charles T. Rubin in MEP), the playing God argument reconsidered (C.A.J. Coady in HE), and the attempt to include non-Western thoughts (Ryuichi Ida in HE, presenting a very traditional bioconservative position from an Asian perspective and hence not being the best choice to widen the focus); all are asking questions that reach further than how to use a specific medical technique in a specific setting.

Ultimately they bring about cosmopolitan questions: How to organise the living together of different beings in one world? How to use the (biotechnical and other) means we have at hand to improve the individual lives and the living together? What is a good life and which possible features of living beings are worth preserving, supporting or bringing about? In this view, the enhancement debate is—without exaggeration—the current appearance of the philosophical reflection of human self-understanding— with impact on such different realms as ethics, politics and philosophical anthropology. Both books provide an excellent overview over many facets of the debate, but the unifying explanation of the relevance of the enhancement debate is still pending.